

PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE SOUTHWEST

Adam Clark Vroman, 1856-1916



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DISCOVERY OF THE LOST VROMAN PLATES

by RUTH I. MAHOOD



RECORDING OF HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

has, since the middle of the nineteenth century, been the contribution of some photographers. Such a photographer was Adam Clark Vroman.

The discovery of his important work, lost in obscurity for many years, is the "saga" of the some twenty-four hundred 6½-by-8½-inch glass photographic negatives now in the collection of the Division of History at the Los Angeles County Museum. They were first brought to my attention in 1957. It was Lawrence Clark Powell of the University of California, Los Angeles, Library who started the search that uncovered these plates. Dr. Powell was asked to write a brochure in honor of the grand opening of the new Vroman's at 695 East Colorado Street, Pasadena, California, on October 8, 1953, an establishment which opened its doors for business in 1894, sixty-seven years ago. Dr. Powell, who at one time had been a delivery boy for Vroman's, believed that still in existence must be the glass plates of the many pictures Mr. Vroman had taken in his career as a photographer. With the help of the late Dr. F. W. Hodge, anthropologist and former Director of the Southwest Museum, he located them in the possession of the Los Angeles County Schools. They were stored in metal file cabinets and appeared to be in fairly good shape. No one had realized the importance of these plates and they had been stored in ground floor storerooms. In February 1954 these cabinets were removed to the Los Angeles County Museum.

To trace the history of these plates, a former employee of the Los Angeles County Schools was consulted. She stated that they were purchased from the A. C. Vroman estate sometime before 1920 for use by the Audio-

Visual Division. There is evidence they were used by the County Schools because there is a nearly complete set of 5-by-7-inch positive film transparencies with the collection. This is fortunate because some of the plates have been cracked and some broken beyond use in the years since they were stored. The exact date of storage by the County Schools is not known.

Actual research on the negatives began one day in January 1957, when I received a call from the Business Manager of the County Schools. He said, "I have *some more* of those glass negatives. What do you want me to do with them?" At the time I hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about. But I did have sense enough to say, after a short hesitation, "Do what you did with the others." It was the right answer because he said, "Fine," and hung up.

A few days later our shipping clerk called me to say there were a couple of boxes of old broken glass down there for me. Realizing it must be the negatives I had them sent up to my office.

Curiosity prompted investigation. The plates were in brown envelopes, numbered and labeled in Mr. Vroman's own inimitable copperplate handwriting. This might be a reminder to all people who collect and photograph to identify the location, persons, date, and any other pertinent information which would save much work in identification later. The first negative was one of Mission San Luis Rey. I held it up to the light and as the image came through sharp and clear I realized that these plates were something special. Until this time, A. C. Vroman was known to me only as the founder of a bookstore in Pasadena, California.

There were only about two hundred and fifty negatives. Where were the others? I began a search which ended in the County Museum Registrar's office with the hope that she might know about them. She looked in her files and found an inventory. When the first plates came to the Museum, a faded and hardly legible inventory came with them. She had deciphered that inventory and had made several typed copies. She told me the plates were stored in the basement of the Education Division.

The collection has been checked thoroughly, completely catalogued, and re-enveloped so the plates are easily accessible when they are wanted. In making the survey it was found that a number of the plates were badly cracked and that some of them were broken beyond repair. This probably oc-

curred during the various moves. If there was any possibility of saving the negative it was carefully pieced together and stored. Some, which were really ground glass, had to be discarded. All possible care was taken to preserve as many as possible.

To do a thorough inventory of these plates required the work of many months. As has been stated, there was an inventory of sorts and each negative had been numbered. The inventory carried two separate numbers for each plate; a "V.E.D." (Visual Education Department) number presumably was that assigned by the Los Angeles County Schools to facilitate their use. This list ran numerically but did not coincide with another listed as "Vroman Number;" presumably A. C. Vroman's own number. No definite conclusion has been reached regarding the relationship. The Museum uses the "V.E.D." for its accession numbers.

The Los Angeles County Museum had a first Vroman exhibition in the summer of 1958, showing about eighty-five sepia reproductions chosen from the negatives of the missions and of Yosemite—only eighty-five of the some twenty-four hundred in the collection. The many comments by the public who saw them and the requests for prints only added to my first impression of their importance. In September 1960, a permanent Vroman gallery was opened. From time to time the prints in this gallery will be changed to afford the public the opportunity of enjoying the majority of the large number of photographs and the variety of subject matter the collection contains.

Vroman was a skilled photographer as the plates have indicated. It was through his interest in photography that he was able to leave this representative collection of a record of the California Missions before restoration, the splendors of Yosemite, the scenic beauty of Pasadena and surrounding areas, a record of a trip to the East, and finally, a complete record of several expeditions to the pueblos of New Mexico and Arizona, led by the late Frederick Webb Hodge.

It was between 1895 and 1905 that he visited all the California missions and made his photographic record. He took them from every angle, interiors and exteriors. Only a love for his work and its subjects could have produced this monument to his labors. He truly was a perfectionist! Realize that for transportation he had to depend on the horse and buggy.

To cite Mr. Vroman while in New Mexico on an expedition, "After a day's drive in a lumber wagon, or at best, a buckboard, sand makes a first-rate bed."

A trip to Yosemite produced a series of scenes about the turn of the century. It is interesting to compare recent pictures with those taken by Mr. Vroman.

In 1897, the late Dr. F. W. Hodge led a Bureau of Ethnology expedition to the pueblos. Dr. Hodge was particularly interested in photographs of the ascent of the Enchanted Mesa (Mesa Encantada). There was a dispute at the time between Professor William Libbey of Princeton College and Dr. Hodge as to whether it had been inhabited by Indians. Libbey had earlier visited the "cairn" or monument on top of the mesa and had decided that it was "the results of erosion." After the Hodge party had made the ascent, Libbey confessed that the famous "cairn" was built with hands. He had seen Mr. Vroman's, in the words of C. F. Lummis, "deadly photograph." In his own inimitable way Lummis also wrote in *Land of Sunshine*, October 1897, in an article, "The Disenchanted Libbey," that "Mr. Vroman's beautiful photographs carry startling proof of the unparalleled innocence of Professor Libbey." It was the actual ascent of the Enchanted Mesa by the Hodge party, and the photographs taken by Mr. Vroman, that made it possible to prove previous habitation on the Mesa.

An interesting sidelight concerning the expedition was told by Dr. Hodge. It seems that Mr. Vroman completely lacked a sense of direction. "He used to set up his tripod in the midst of juniper and piñon stands, walk away a short distance to see if he could get a better shot of Acoma, for example, and then become lost. I was always having to find his tripod for him!"

It was again in 1899 that Mr. Vroman accompanied, as photographer, an expedition of the Bureau of American Ethnology into the Southwest to examine the Indian pueblos and ruins of ancient cliff dwellers. Dr. Hodge again was in charge of the party which included Dr. Elliot Coues, George Parker Winship, William H. Guilford, and Albert J. Bird. The *Santa Fe New Mexican* of July 28, 1899 states, "The main object of the party is to visit as many pueblos of New Mexico as possible and to obtain a large and complete series of photographs."

The scientists traveled 650 miles in their wagon, camping every night, and visited all the pueblos from Taos to Zuñi, besides a lot of unknown ruins. The Pasadena *Daily Evening Star* of August 29, 1899 states, "They found the ruins of the Cibolitta Valley and of the Santa Clara canyon the most interesting, being the best preserved. Mr. Vroman is wearing a dark brown complexion and looks a little thin but says he is now feeling well and brought his appetite home with him."

In connection with the expedition, Mr. Vroman wrote a series of articles for *Photo Era* which appeared between January and October 1901. In addition to the one on "The Enchanted Mesa," there were "The Moki Pueblos," "The Moki Snake Dance," "The Petrified Forest of Arizona," "The Pueblos of Zuñi," and "Photography in the Great Southwest." Here is Mr. Vroman's picture of the Pueblo Indian:

"We've been educated from time immemorial that the Indian is a devil incarnate, only waiting to cut your throat and scalp you! Not so. After portions of five summers spent among the Pueblos, I am willing to vouch for fair treatment at their hands, and in fact, he will go more than his share of the way every time to do right. Have no fear of the Indian; it is the bad white man that you should be watchful of in this country."

And again, "The Indian is a sympathetic fellow, appreciates kindness and never forgets a friend. I have no liking for the man who has been among the Indians and says that 'all good Indians are dead Indians,' and for those who have never been among them, and hold such opinions, a summer's outing among the Pueblos will, I am sure, bring on a change of heart. I speak only for the Pueblo Indian, as I know nothing of the Plains Indian, but have no fear but he will average with us in honor and truthfulness."

Because of his deep love for his adopted Southwest, for the missions, and for all that pertains to the romantic period of the state's history, he was able by artistic photography, by printed words, and by lectures and conversation to illuminate the annals of past times in California.

A short time before his death, he did an interesting and enlightening introduction to a late edition of *Ramona* in which he told of his personal observation at the scenes where the story is laid and threw entertaining sidelights on the author and her different characters. This also appeared

in book form titled, *The Genesis of the Story of Ramona*. The introduction states that "To unravel the tangle is the aim of the article, and if possible, work out the genesis of the story in such a manner as seems necessary for the better understanding of the book." With this thought, the writer made a careful search for any information on the subject available and obtainable.

In the book, he explains some of the apparent inconsistencies as to the location of some of the scenes. The little book is thoroughly illustrated by his delightful photographs of scenes of the locale of the book.

He was an art collector. Many of his treasures were found among the Indians. He was particularly proud of the Navajo blankets: "... one of those marvelously beautiful ones that are so much sought after just at this time, and which to me are so much more interesting and beautiful than any Persian or Turkish rugs, and why should we not value the handiwork of our native Indians as much as a foreign purchase? It will be but a few years before an Indian blanket will be as rare as a buffalo skin is today." There were also Kachina dolls in the collection that he turned over to the Southwest Museum.

He sought to create interest in the Southwest by presenting to the people of Pasadena his pictorial record. He gave the Pasadena Public Library sixteen green morocco-bound and gold-tooled albums of mounted photographs of California and the Southwest, taken in the late 1880's and through the early 1900's. He also bequeathed to the library a collection of books on the Southwest, together with \$10,000 to augment the collection.

During all this time, the bookstore at 60 East Colorado Street prospered. The inventory increased each year until, in 1916, it reached 30,000 titles. Before his death, he made arrangements for his employees to acquire interest in the substantial business that they had. To aid his employees in purchasing stock, he included them in his will, bequeathing to each \$100 for each year of service in the store.

Mr. Vroman died of pernicious anemia on July 24, 1916 at the Altadena home of a business associate, George F. Howell. He was 60 years old. His estate was valued at \$100,000 and was distributed among friends and relatives in a variety of bequests. At his request, his ashes were scattered over his wife's grave in the Friends Cemetery in Flora Dale, Pennsylvania.